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12. (SBU) The Syrian Government continued to provide political and material support to Hizballah and political support to Palestinian terrorist groups. HAMAS, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine- General Command (PFLP-GC), among others, base their external leadership in Damascus. The Syrian Government insists that the Damascus-based groups undertake only political and informational activities, but Palestinian groups with leaders in Syria have claimed responsibility for anti-Israeli terrorist acts.

13. (SBU) Syria's public support for the Palestinian groups varied, depending on its national interests and international pressure. In 2003, these groups lowered their public profile after Damascus announced that they had voluntarily closed their offices in Syria. In September 2005, however, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad held a highly publicized meeting with rejectionist leaders, and a month later the rejectionist leaders participated in a meeting in Damascus with the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, Gholam Ali Haddad Adel. In April 2006, visiting Hamas Foreign Minister Zahar met with Damascus-based Palestinian leaders and attended a rally at the Palestinian Yarmouk refugee camp, alongside Hamas leader Khalid Mish'al and representatives of other rejectionist groups and Hizballah. In July, Mish'al held a highly publicized press conference under tight security at a Damascus hotel, expressing gratitude for Syria's unconditional support to the Palestinian cause.

14. (SBU) Syrian officials publicly condemned international terrorism, but made a distinction between terrorism and what they considered to be "legitimate armed resistance" by Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, by Lebanese Hizballah, and by Iraqi opponents of the "occupation of Iraq." The Syrian Government has not been implicated directly in an act of terrorism since 1986, although preliminary findings of a UN investigation into the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri indicated a strong likelihood of official Syrian involvement. That investigation continues.

15. (SBU) On September 12, four Syrian nationals with alleged Islamist ties used grenades, guns and a small truck bomb to

launch an attack against the U.S. Embassy in Damascus. All four of the assailants were killed, as was a Syrian security officer as he responded to the attack. In the incident's aftermath, the Syrian government enhanced security for the Embassy and American personnel in Syria, although the government declined to provide the Embassy with the findings of its internal investigation into the attack. Damascus has repeatedly assured the United States that it will take every possible measure to protect U.S. citizens and facilities in Syria, but at the same time has not taken measures considered necessary by the USG.

16. (SBU) In the past, Damascus cooperated with the United States and other foreign governments against al-Qaida and other terrorist organizations and individuals. In May 2005, however, the Syrian Government ended intelligence cooperation on security, citing continued U.S. public complaints about inadequate Syrian assistance to end the flow of fighters and money to Iraq. In 2004-2005, Syria upgraded physical security conditions on the border and began to give closer scrutiny to military-age Arab males entering Syria (visas are still not required for citizens of Arab countries). It also highlighted the repatriation of more than 1,200 foreign extremists and the arrest of more than 4,000 Syrians trying to go to Iraq to fight. In November 2006, Syria's FM announced the resumption of diplomatic relations with Iraq after a 25-year rupture, and, a month later, the Syrian and Iraqi ministers of Interior signed a five-year memorandum of understanding to boost, among other things, joint efforts to control the borders and combat terrorism.

17. (SBU) As in recent years, Damascus highlighted in Syrian government-controlled press information about clashes on

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Syrian territory with terrorist groups, particularly with the Jund a-Sham group. Separately, in November, security agents on the Syrian side of the border with Lebanon engaged in a gunbattle with a Syrian Islamic militant from the Tawhid and Jihad group. The militant, who was trying to use fake documents to cross into Lebanon, subsequently blew himself up with a hand grenade.

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